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ABSTRACT

Public schools can, and should, do a lot to solve the current, controversial ethnocentrism problem. Teachers must receive adequate training and competent in-service help so that they may provide multicultural education and face their own prejudices. Responsibility for students' behavior and education should be shared by the homes and the community. The core curriculum must be pluralized if educators are to teach each child in the existing school population. Sometimes students can fight prejudice in the school environment with a few well-chosen words. Parental support can be a great help in securing harmony in the public schools and thus promoting tolerance, respect, and a sound education for all children. A thoughtful multicultural curriculum is a good weapon against ethnocentrism, which should have no place in schools of America where "liberty and justice for all" is pledged. (Contains eight references. A list of 17 implications is attached.) (RS)

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ED 379 703

Susan Partridge

Ethnocentrism as It Relates to Our Public Schools

Decades of teaching experience in public and private schools, at both the elementary and secondary levels, and in various geographical areas, have been convincing in the belief that the public schools can, and should, do a lot to solve the current, controversial ethnocentrism problem. Necessary help from others who share the problem should be sought.

As a rule, young children are gregarious. They love to laugh and play with each other. They aren't bitterly prejudiced unless they've been taught to be that way. Day after day, children of various ethnic groups and Native American children were seen playing together and, seemingly, enjoying it to the fullest. It was noted, too, that color, religion, economic status and social status weren't problems. Playing ball, conversing and the pursuit of various other interests were the "drawing cards." On occasion personalities were concerned but solving the conflicts was a challenge and usually proved successful.

The current problem seems to be ethnocentrism, which is defined in The Random House Dictionary of the English Language thus: "The belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and culture accompanied by a feeling of

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contempt for other groups and cultures; a tendency to view other groups or cultures in terms of one's own."

America is a democratic country and the reason given by many immigrants for leaving their homelands and coming here for the freedom a democracy provides.

Democracy is defined in The Random House Dictionary as a government by the people; a form of government in which the superior power is vested in the people and exercised by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system; a state of society characterized by formal equality of rights and privileges; political or social equality. This definition denies centrism.

How then do some of those outgoing, fun-loving children later become vociferous, demanding, even militant adults? What can be done to prevent this?

Our economy is much different from what it was years ago. Today, with our great, and ever-increasing advances in technology, there are fewer and fewer unskilled jobs available. This means that some willing workers who are not educated for today's work force can't find work; therefore we MUST educate them.

Since the teachers, for the most part will be doing the educating, which must be multicultural in order to include all children, they must receive adequate training and competent in-service help.

Valerie Ooka Pang (5), an associate professor of teacher education at San Diego University, uses three phases of instruction in her class on multicultural education:

1. Who am I? Am I prejudiced?
2. What do I think about culturally diverse communities?
3. What does multicultural education look like in a classroom?

Pang believes that teachers do not want to be prejudiced, but, "because prejudice is often part of the hidden curriculum, they may be acting or thinking in ways that limit their own growth or that of their students." She offers the following example: To a teacher's statement, "I don't know why those black kids can't sit still," she asks the teacher, "Do you hear what you are saying? Do you also say, 'I don't know why those white kids can't sit still'?" She adds that another teacher may point out the first teacher's unconscious prejudices because of her tone of voice and her use of THOSE children.

In the second phase of her instruction, she attempts to clarify some teachers' misconceptions about culturally diverse communities. She does this by taking the class on field trips and requiring teachers to donate time to a community organization of their choice. She believes that

teachers can be more effective if they can "make connections between the school community and students' lives."

In the third phase, Pang makes it clear that culture can affect the learning environment. Personal experience throughout my many decades of teaching have long since made this believable. She offers the following example:

> One teacher asked a Vietnamese student to work with a new Cambodian immigrant. The Vietnamese student told the teacher, "I don't think he will accept my help." The teacher dismissed her concerns, believing that, since both students were from southeast Asia, they would have natural connections. "I don't think you will have any trouble," she told the Vietnamese student.
>
> Soon after this exchange, the Cambodian student came to the teacher with fire in his eyes and said, "I respect you because you are the teacher, but I won't work with a Vietnamese."

Witness has been borne to similar situations, but it was found that setting examples of respect and tolerance and enlisting the aid of well-adjusted and well-liked students to combat intolerance and disrespect, gradually lessened the number of such situations.

Intolerance and disrespect often stem from a lack of knowledge and understanding. Most people can recall a situation in which their prejudice was lessened, even obliterated, as they learned and understood more about the situation in question. However, the more some people learn

about certain things, the more prejudiced they become against them.

Currently, ethnocentrism is receiving considerable attention. At the beginning of Phyllis Puffer's (6) article, "Reducing Ethnocentrism: A Cross-Cultural Experience for Sociology Classes," a short abstract reads, "Before and after measures show that taking a sociology class to a fundamentalist African-American Baptist service can change white students' ethnocentric attitudes for the better. Step-by-step instructions show how the instructor can conduct the exercise. Quotations from some papers help to prepare the instructor for a range of reactions by students."

In the article, she explains the exercise as carried out; it follows in part:

> The basic exercise requires students to attend a church service of a different racial group. After the service the students must make detailed notes about their observations and reactions. Then they must write a paper analyzing their experiences and observations in sociological terms.
>
> In the first version of the exercise, each student makes one visit to a church service of his or her own denomination, but of a different race.
>
> In the second version of the exercise, all students in the class attend an African-American fundamentalist Baptist service as a group.

Class discussions, held after attending the church services were considered important and revealing. Apparently, Puffer feels that the exercise was successful, for she says, "Besides reducing ethnocentrism, this exercise is also effective in teaching various sociological subjects."

A couple of quick questions come to mind: Will the results of this exercise have a lasting and favorable effect on the changed attitudes which resulted from the experiment? How did the students' parents feel about it?

We have been reading, in reputable professional periodicals about the teaching of black history. Certainly, it should be included in our history classes. Joseph Durham (3), a professor of education at Morgan State University in Baltimore, has offered us ten commandments of teaching black history; they follow:

Ten Commandments of Teaching Black History

1. Thou shalt not make heroes of ordinary black men and women who were no better and no worse than their fellow Americans.
2. Thou shalt not replace white myths with black or polka dot myths.
3. Thou shalt not hide the unpleasant and seamy side of black history, for historical scholarship will not hold blameless those who distort either white or black history.
4. Thou shalt not bear false witness by going beyond the strength of the historical data.

5. Thou shalt not commit the supreme idolatry of thinking that black history can only be taught by black teachers.
6. Thou shalt not teach black history to black students only; white (and other) students need to know black history as well.
7. Thou shalt not superimpose any particular mode of thinking on black history to make it fit preconceived notions.
8. Thou shalt not pervert black history for use as a weapon of propaganda.
9. Thou shalt combine black art, music, literature, and history to form a comprehensive story of the black experience.
10. Thou shalt always aim for the integration of black history and the history other ethnic groups into the total fabric of American history and the history of mankind.

These commandments seem worthy of consideration, as they seem to emphasize truth, and they include teaching, along with black history, the history of other ethnic groups. Multicultural education, which speaks to the truth, is felt to be a good weapon against ethnocentrism, and thus uphold the American way of life with its freedom and justice for all.

It is felt that schools should not be expected to bear the entire responsibility for students' behavior and education. It is felt that it should be shared by the homes. It is further felt that a strong community sense can be a great help. Witness has been borne, throughout

decades, of its many provisions: It provides, among other things, a sense of stability, a caring attitude, a sense of pride in achievement and overcomes, or minimizes, racial intolerance. Establishing a community sense in a large urban area is more difficult than it is in rural, semi-rural or suburban areas. However, Richard Allen Chase and William G. Durden (2), in an article, "Linking a City's Culture to Students' Learning," The Baltimore Network, a community-based coalition that includes the aquarium, science center, and zoo; museums, libraries; theatres; businesses; government agencies; voluntary organizations; and individuals, is explained by the authors.

The Baltimore Network:

> We started the Network in early 1991 with a commitment by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY) to host a conversation among potential participants. CTY has 10 years of experience and supports the idea that every young person has interests and talents that should be identified early in life and nurtured for lifelong learning.

They are aware that schools do use some of the city's cultural institutions but not in a sustained fashion. For example, they found out that schools use cultural institutions primarily through class visits. It became clear to them that integration of school and museum experiences would have a powerful potential for teaching and

learning. They state, "The Baltimore Learning Network hopes to foster such integration between school and museum programs." As the children visit the museums in groups and share the enjoyment of the many artifacts, ethnocentrism should be lowered.

It has become clear that the core curriculum must be pluralized if we are to teach each child in the existing school population. It is felt that a statement made by Asa G. Hilliard (4) leaves us no excuse for not doing what we could, and should, do; it reads, "It is not necessary to choose between uniqueness and commonality in building a core curriculum. In a democratic society, all culture groups must be represented. Ultimately, if the curriculum is centered in truth, it will be pluralistic."

Hilliard offers further information regarding curriculum change:

> Curriculum change must proceed first and foremost from the assumption that there is truth in the whole human experience. Schools must also accept the fact that some racial and ethnic groups have endured hundreds of years of systematic defamation that have distorted, denied and deformed the truth of their cultural and historical reality.
>
> A wealth of old, multidisciplinary, international, and multiracial literature exists that would allow us to find the true stories of the roles of all groups in human history so that we could include them in school

> curriculums. Nothing less than the full truth of the human experience is worthy of our schools and our children.

It is generally known that many of our blacks endured unfair, even cruel treatment for many years. It is encouraging to note that many black educators, though they can relate to this and have great sympathy for those who were victims of this base treatment, say that they do not approve of the current excessive demands now being made by some blacks. They believe that excessiveness can hurt, more than help, their cause. Their commendable attitude should be encouraging to those educators who are involved in curriculum change.

In the February 1995 issue of The Reading Teacher, there appeared an article, "Working and Playing with Others: Cultural Conflict in a Kindergarten Literacy Program," by P.R. Schmidt (8) and based on the premise that "literacy learning of children of ethnic minority backgrounds may be hampered by the informal social interactions that take place in the classroom."

Though decades have passed, the article immediately brought to mind a lesson which I, as a beginning teacher, learned from a student - a lesson which has served me well throughout the years.

I was on duty, prior to the beginning of classes, observing the children, gathered informally, and seemingly enjoying conversations with each other. A young black boy was standing in an aisle listening when a young girl came running up the aisle shouting, "Out of my way, Nigger!"

I was horrified and about to let it be known when a diminutive girl, a well-liked classmate of the offender, walked up to her and said in a very quiet voice, "G., S. may be black, but your heart is black." The offender seemed quite subdued by the comment.

All that day, I seemed overcome by the thought that a student handled the situation much better than I would have handled it because of my outrage. Since then, I have never underestimated the help that well-adjusted and well-liked students can be as we try to fight prejudice. This is extremely important now as we have greater diversity in our school populations than we had in yesteryear.

Diane Ravitch (7) describes our culture "as a common culture, as the work of whites and blacks, of men and women, of Native Americans and African-Americans, of Hispanics and Asians, of immigrants from England, France, Germany, Mexico, Haiti, Ireland, Colombia, Scandinavia, Cuba, Italy, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Korea, India, China, the Philippines and Ghana; of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Mormons,

and millions of other individuals who added their voices to the American chorus."

This description makes it clear that if all students are to be served fairly and well, no single ethnic group can have "center stage."

Diane Ravitch's connection with the U.S. Office of Education makes a statement worth considering; it follows: "If the public schools abandon their historical mission as the common schools of the nation, if they instead foster racial and ethnic separatism, they will forfeit their claim to public support." Some programs which might have been successful have failed because provision hadn't been made for adequate funding. With no claim to public support, it would be more difficult to design and implement multicultural programs based on truth and which would discourage ethnocentrism.

Parents can be great supporters of multi-education if they are convinced that we have their children's interests at heart. Our respect for all children, regardless of their race or creed, a sound education based on truth and smiles showing on the faces of their children as they return from school each day should be convincing. Parental support can be a great help in securing harmony in the public schools and thus promoting tolerance, respect and a sound education for all the children.

According to verbal reports, reports in newspapers with a wide circulation and in reputable educational periodicals, there is still much to be done in order to overcome prejudices interfering with the public school giving ALL students an education that will enable them to become happy, productive citizens. An example follows: In an Associated Press (1) article, "Black Teacher Ordered Not to Wear African Garb in the Wake of Complaints by Whites," the order is explained. It resulted in a protest by 100 black students who staged a protest in support of the teacher and also to protest the lack of a Black History Month program this year at the high school. It is believed that any interference with teaching must not be tolerated if we are to provide for all students an education based on truth.

It is concluded that a multicultural curriculum based on absolute truth is a good weapon against ethnocentrism, which, it is felt, should have no place in the public schools of America where "liberty and justice for all" is pledged.

It is further concluded that the schools should not have to solve the ethnocentrism problem alone. There are others who share the solution, among them are parents, supervisory personnel, the community, appropriate social agencies and lawmakers who can do their part toward the needed funding.

Implications

1. Public schools should offer a valid multicultural curriculum centered in truth if we are to remain a pluralistic society.
2. Ethnocentrism has no place in our public schools.
3. Teachers must strive to understand all the ethnic groups with which they are concerned and thus make their teaching more effective.
4. Teacher-training institutions must do their part in helping teachers deal with the increasing diversity among students.
5. Teachers should be careful of their verbal behavior as even an unconscious slip in which no offense is intended, can be wrongly interpreted.
6. Never underestimate the value of caring, well-liked and well-adjusted children in curtailing the slandering of children who are viewed by some students as different.
7. Be aware of the past sufferings of some ethnic groups, but discourage excessiveness in trying to right the wrongs at this late date. Encourage them to focus on, and enjoy, the freedom for which so many say they have come to America, and be happy in so doing.

8. Let us recognize, and be grateful for, the contributions of various races and creeds.

9. Textbooks must be carefully checked for truth, and should include the history of the various ethnic groups.

10. Texts should be updated.

11. Appropriate use of technology can add to the effectiveness of teaching. Software must be selected with great care.

12. Teachers should be kept up to date with the seemingly never-ending advances in technology and should always receive adequate help in its use.

13. The uniqueness of each child should be respected and given the needed attention.

14. Unfair criticism of public schools should be checked and discouraged, for if it gets "out of hand," it can interfere with progress.

15. All those (many mentioned earlier) who share the responsibility for the welfare of children should do their part. Schools can not, and should not be expected to bear the entire responsibility.

16. Schools should be run by people trained to do so.

17. Finally, teachers should exercise their voting rights and vote for those politicians who are truly interested in providing the best education for each and every student.

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